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ABSTRACT

This paper documents and describes a new course in visual communications developed at the University of Oklahoma to serve a general college undergraduate audience. The course content which is summarized in three areas--graphics and media techniques, visual/verbal message design and delivery, and "pure visual" message design and delivery--is intended to open-up or reawaken students' visual awareness and visual thinking processes. Appendices include a course outline, an evaluation instrument for the course, and a handout on a simplified drawing technique. (RAO)

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# DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS COURSE IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING

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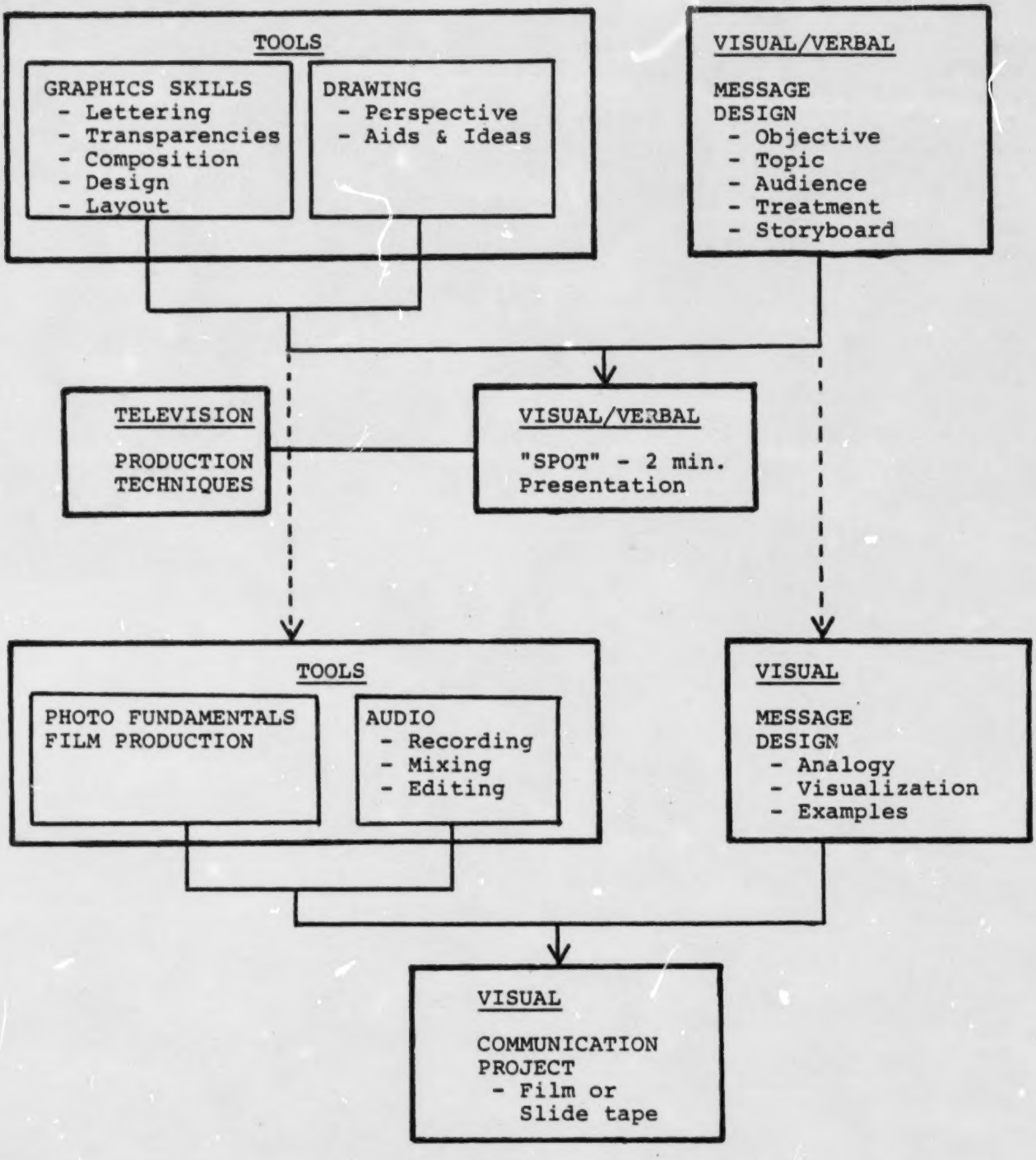
IR007897

STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE



Development and Implementation of a Visual Communications Course in a University Setting

ABSTRACT

This paper documents and describes a new course in visual communications, developed to serve a general college undergraduate audience. The content and methods of the course are described as well as intentions for student learning. The course purposes are discussed as in instance of visual literacy training in a setting in which less application of visual literacy concerns seems present than in public schools. Information from informal evaluation is presented.

Appendices include a course outline and handout on a simplified drawing technique.

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## INTRODUCTION

An undergraduate course entitled "Visual Communication" is first being offered at the University of Oklahoma during the fall 1978 term. This paper represents a summary of the beginnings, purposes, and procedures of that course. Our belief is that a course such as this can be an extremely helpful influence on students taking it. It is the primary purpose of this paper to describe the ways in which we expect the course to help students and the approaches we are employing to deliver and evaluate the course.

## COURSE GOALS

The course has the following as its catalog description:

> Educ. 3133, Visual Communication. Prerequisite: none. An undergraduate elective course. This course is intended to provide students with a wide range of skills and understandings in visual communications media, with emphasis on production of visual media. Course learnings should be useful to students in preparing and using visual aids and visualized presentations for both classes and career. Topics include: basic composition, flat pictures, non-projected displays, duplicating processes, transparencies and photography. Lectures, demonstrations, and student application projects will be employed in the course. Within two major projects, application of the topic areas will be made by each student.

The spirit of this description is consistent with one of our major goals for the course: that it be a course of practical benefit to the student in enhancing ability to present information to others. The goals for the course, in this regard, are quite similar to those of an audiovisual media production course; a principal difference in this course being in target audience. In this case, skills in media planning and production are being taught not to prospective teachers and graduate students in

educational media, but to students in engineering, philosophy, anthropology, broadcasting, and aviation...in sum, to any undergraduate who wants the course.

Another sort of interest we have for the course is not made clear in the course description: impact on thinking and problem-solving skills. Arnheim in Visual Thinking argues that perception is thinking; that the processes of receiving, storing, and processing of information are components of thinking.[1] Though vision is a sense that has not been highly articulated, Arnheim contends that "The great virtue of vision is that...its universe offers inexhaustibly rich information about the objects and events of the outer world." He concludes that "Vision is the primary medium of thought." It is through this primary medium that we hope to achieve an impact on the thinking/perceiving process.

Although some researchers contend that thinking is something which cannot be taught, this course was based on the premise that a student's capacity to think can be changed. Psychologists such as Robert Olton and Richard Crutchfield find that "direct training in thinking can produce significant increments in thinking skills." They ask in their paper ("Developing the Skills of Productive Thinking") for "systematic programs for teaching the student how to think" -- and for such programs at all levels of education.[2]

Unfortunately, many of the recent demands on education have been detrimental to emphasis on development of the thinking process. The "Back-to-Basics" demands and other such narrow approaches to education have often brought about neglect of this basic: thinking/perceiving. Robert McKim in Experiences in Visual Thinking points out that "Any mental ability that is not exercised decays, and

visual ability is no exception."[3] His point is that vision atrophies--consequently, a part of perception is lost or at least unused. Students are too often taught to label the visual stimulus quickly without trying to see it. McKim gives this example: "The word-dependent individual rarely sees trees in their many shades of green and trunk-bark-limb-twig-leaf complexity. Instead, he sees trees as abstract visual concepts, vague green blobs on a stick."[4]

This course in visual communication is--as stated--designed in part on the premise that the thinking process can be enhanced. Secondly, the course is intended to make improvements where there is atrophy in the visual thinking process--to reopen those areas of perception/cognition lost by one-sided education, or to develop those skills never acquired.

CONTENT AND METHODS

The content of the course is illustrated in the attached syllabus (see Appendix A, Syllabus: Education 3133). The work of the course can be summarized into three main areas: 1) graphics and media techniques, 2) visual/verbal message design and delivery, and 3) "pure visual" message design and delivery. The two texts for the course, Nelms, Thinking with a Pencil,[5] and Bullough, Creating Instructional Materials,[6] were used in the first half of the semester along with lectures, demonstrations, and laboratory work to provide a foundation in the graphics and media techniques area. Nelms' book represents something of a departure from what appears to be common practice for either an audiovisual media course or a visual literacy course. Its content and emphasis are highly technical in the sense that a great number of visualizing, rendering,

and drawing techniques are pulled together in one volume. We view these techniques as having a dual relevance in that, first, they are of direct utility in creating products and solving certain kinds of problems, and second, in that these skills seem to be prerequisite to higher-order learnings in visual thinking and communication. Whether these techniques which Nelms presents are necessary prerequisites or not, we are not sure; but they do seem to us to be helpful prerequisites. At the present time, now a little over half-way through the first semester's offering of the course, we believe that a useful addition to the course as a required supplementary reading (if not as a text) would be McKim's Experiences in Visual Thinking. It seems to us to pick up where Nelms leaves off.

The first half of the term also included some work in freehand drawing with the McIntyre approach. Although none of McIntyre's publications were used, his approach to breaking the ice on perspective (for purposes of both seeing it and doing it) is the best we know of from our standpoint.[7] For some learners, however, even McIntyre's approach needs simplification (and, interestingly enough, the learners we are referring to here are college undergraduates). For example, with some students we found a need to approach the drawing of a cube by showing a sequence of very simple steps to arrive at the flattened diamond shape for the top, then the rest of the figure. This approach, for those who may be curious, is summarized and attached as Appendix B. We should hasten to add, however, that this more-or-less mechanical sequence is employed only in the interest of helping those students who have difficulty

or who can not learn to perform the task otherwise. Quite obviously, the capability of drawing a cube is not what we are primarily interested in. The root of our interest is in an interaction which we believe exists between "being able to draw" and "seeing." We believe that to begin with mechanically performed steps does not prevent one from leaving them aside when they are no longer needed.

The second area of the course, visual/verbal message design, is the subject of one of the course projects which, for lack of a better label, we are calling a "spot." In this project, students not only practice media production skills in preparing visual aids, but also are asked to plan a presentation in such a way that visual materials are used to reinforce an oral delivery. This task is a common one for all of us. Practice and help with planning, producing, and using materials with an oral presentation is something we see as being of direct and high utility to students. In addition, however, we hope for visual literacy achievements for students as a product of visual sequencing, side-by-side with verbal analogue. In our experience with students to date in helping them with their plans for this project, we find an extremely wide variability with regard to their skills in imagining a visual sequence, even when that sequence may be one of verbal-visuals(e.g., a flip chart with key words as primary content). In addition to planning and producing their "spots," students will gain a new perspective on their work as well as some useful new skills when they videotape their spots in our television studio.

The third area of the course is that of "pure" visual message

design and delivery. Here, the vehicle is a project which is to employ either super 8 film or 35mm slides to convey a message. The guidelines for the project require that the student develop a sound track, but the sound track may not carry narration or people "telling" the content in any way. Metaphoric/analogic message designs are encouraged, with the student encouraged to try not to use cliches. Such a project has been a standard part of a beginning graduate-level survey course in educational media taught by one of the authors at the University of Oklahoma over the past eight years. That experience for students has been, over the years, a consistently successful one and has had a part in leading us to our current interests in visual literacy itself. We hope that this project, in a course for which purpose and prerequisite learnings within the course are aimed more directly at visual thinking than we have tried for in the past, will lead to attaining the ambitious "visual thinking" goal we hold for students.

EVALUATION

We are afraid that in this course (as in so many efforts in visual literacy as well as in educational development efforts at large) we will not have done as good a job at evaluation as we would wish. We had hoped to include a preassessment of students, using cognitive style and other instruments which include visual tasks to measure visual/perceptual variables and other factors such as general ability and aptitudes. Due to time pressures, lack of adequate prior preparation for such testing, and a new policy ruling on research on human subjects, our evaluation work

has been and will be through the remainder of this offering of the course, rather conventional. A midterm exam over drawing, layout and graphics techniques was administered. The exam included both knowledge and performance items. Projects will be evaluated in accordance with procedures and criteria described in the syllabus (Appendix A). Information on students' entering abilities and learning progress has also been obtained through working directly with the students. One very interesting finding is that many students not only do not possess high skills in visual communication, they appear severely disadvantaged in their ability to imagine and manipulate sequences of ideas...visual or verbal. In using the AECT/Kodak Photo Story Discovery Sets, we found (informally by our subjective judgement) an amazing range among class members' ability to sequence or re-sequence the cards. These same students are those who presently are finding it difficult to plan their "spot" presentations and films. We have not made an attempt to measure the relationship between their general academic success and this ability, but would expect to find a slight but insignificant positive correlation from what we do know of the students through personal conversation and advisement. Of particular interest is one student in this class of thirty who appears to have a very severe perceptual disability. The student, a junior majoring in an Arts and Sciences academic discipline, would not, we believe, be able to successfully complete many of the items in the Frostig or Zweig tests for reading readiness. This student does not read well and has had little academic success in college, but he is a junior and will probably graduate.

## References

[1]Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969, p. 18.

[2]*New Directions in Developmental Psychology* (edited by P. Mussen, J. Langer, and M. Covington [Holt, Rinehart & Winston]); quoted in R. H. McKim, *Experiences in Visual Thinking* (Monterey: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1972), p. 23.

[3]McKim, p. 24.

[4]Ibid.

[5]New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1964.

[6]2nd ed. (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1978).

[7]Bruce McIntyre, *Drawing Textbook* (Santa Ana, Calif.: By the author, Audiovisual Drawing Program, 1014 North Wright Street, 1961).

APPENDIX A

COURSE OUTLINE

EDTE 3133

Visual Communications

Instructor: Dr. Tillman J. Ragan
Office: Collings Hall, Rm. 201
Hours: 9:30-12 M-W-F
Phone: 325-4205. Please leave message with your number if you can not reach me. I will call you back.

Lab Instructor: Margaret Smith
Office: Collings Hall, Rm. 231
Phone: 325-4205

1. Goal and Purposes of Course:

The primary purpose of this course is to provide you with visual communications skills and understandings to assist you in overall communication ability for future course work, future career applications, and current uses for which these skills may be of use.

Three primary uses of visual communications tools will be treated in the course:

a. Using visuals to aid or assist you in communicating something in a situation in which the primary communication channel is spoken verbal language, such as a speech or report, a lecture, an explanation of something to a friend, or television news, weather, and sports. In all of these situations, the need for a "visual aid" is commonplace, whether the aid be a prepared visual (such as a chart, transparency, or display) or an informal sketch or diagram made on the spur of the moment.

b. Using visuals to carry a whole message. Sequences of pictures can be used to communicate a whole message that would otherwise be awkward or impossible to get across otherwise. Pure-visual messages are sometimes found in films (especially short educational, documentary, and experimental films), photo essays, slide sequences, and drawings. Few people have the opportunity to develop skills in this extremely rewarding and exciting area.

c. Using visuals or "visual mediation" to assist in problem-solving, creative thinking, and design. Some uses of visual tools and skills fall outside the communication realm, strictly speaking, and can assist you in visual thinking.

2. Course Objectives: each student should be able to:

   a. Design, develop, and use a variety of visual communications tools and media.

   b. Analyze message content and select or combine appropriate media into a message delivery system.

   c. Demonstrate knowledge and comprehension of techniques and terminology.

   note: an overview of the content topics for the course is provided by the tables of contents of the two texts.

3. Texts:

   a. Bullough, Creating Instructional Materials.

   b. Hanks, Belliston, and Edwards, Design Yourself!.

4. Graded Work:

   a. A short illustrated presentation or lecturette (approx. 5 min.) in which you explain a single concept or idea to an audience. This project will be a vehicle for your application and practice with using visual communications tools in the "visual aids" sense. Your primary message should be carried verbally, with visuals employed to provide support, clarification, and interest. You might immagine a briefing, sales presentation, staff report, teaching, or television advertisement as example reference situations. You will develop a script or outline, visual materials to accompany the presentation (e.g., flip chart, overhead transparencies), and make your presentation to the class.

   b. A short film or slide-tape. In this project, you will plan and produce a short film or slide-tape which communicates a message in a non-verbal mode. Sound is required, but must be music or other non-verbal audio.

   c. A portfolio of your products from laboratory work. The portfolio should include materials prepared for the lecturette and film/slide-tape as well as one or more examples of other production techniques taught in class but not employed in your other projects. Portfolios should also include technical notes on techniques or processes employed.

5. Deadlines:

   a. Mid-term exam; Thursday, Nov. 1
   b. Lecturette; October 16,18,23, and 25 (will sign up for days)
   c. Film or slide-tape; Thursday, Nov. 29
   d. Portfolio; Tuesday, Dec. 4

EDTE 3133 SLIDE-TAPE or FILM

NAME _____

| Possible | Made | Consideration |
|---|---|---|
| 5 | ____ | STORYBOARD |
| 5 | ____ | MESSAGE DESIGN |
| 5 | ____ | TECHNIQUE (shots, production quality of film or slides, editing) |
| 5 | ____ | AUDIO |
| 5 | ____ | PURPOSE _____ TOTAL |

---

EDTE 3133 LECTURETTE

NAME _____

| Possible | Made | Consideration |
|---|---|---|
| 5 | ____ | EVIDENCE OF PLANNING (limited topic, organized) |
| 5 | ____ | DELIVERY |
| 5 | ____ | QUALITY OF VISUALS |
| 5 | ____ | APPROPRIATENESS OF VISUALS |
| 5 | ____ | USE OF VISUALS _____ TOTAL |

---

EDTE 3133 PORTFOLIO

NAME _____

Considerations: TECHNICAL NOTES NEATNESS LAYOUT AND DESIGN
CORRECT USE OF MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

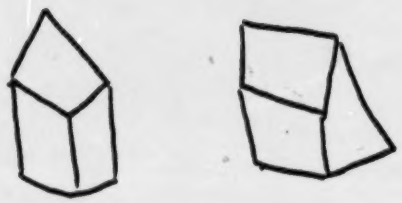
| Possible | Made | Type | Possible | Made | Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4 | ____ | HANDMADE TRSP. w/OVERLAY | 4 | ____ | FREEHAND DRAWINGS |
| 4 | ____ | THERMAL TRSP. w/OVERLAY | 3 | ____ | WRICO LETTERING |
| 3 | ____ | COLOR LIFT TRSP. | 3 | ____ | TRANSFER LETTERING |
| | | | 4 | ____ | ACCORDION FOLDOUT |
| | | | | ____ | TOTAL |

APPENDIX B

Drawing Foreshortened Basic Shapes: a Step-By-Step Approach

The following is a written condensation of the approach employed to instruct students in drawing with foreshortening when other methods fail. The errors which students sometimes seem to be incapable of correcting without help such as is outlined below are seen in these hypothetical but commonplace examples:

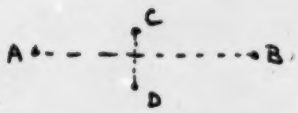
Draw a cube:



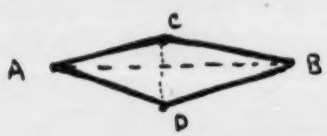
Summary of Steps Taught:

1. Establish and label two points that are on a horizontal level--draw a faint line between them.

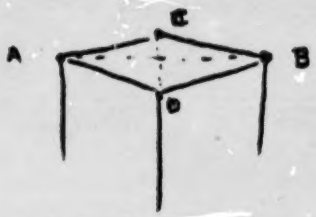
2. Establish and label two points midway between line AB; put one a little above the line and the other a little below. Make the one below the line a little bit farther from the line than the one above it is.



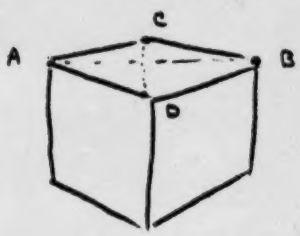

3. Connect A-C; C-B; B-D; and D-A with a solid line.



4. Draw 3 lines straight down and parallel from lines A,D, and B. Make the middle line (from D), a little longer than you made the other two.




5. Connect the bottoms of the three lines.




6. Do it again a few times, varying the size and height of the cube, but always be sure A and B are on a horizontal line and that C and D are pretty close to line A-B. Don't forget to make D a little farther down than C is up.

7. Try it without the points.

8. See what happens when you move C over to the left from middle and D over to the right from middle by about the same amount.